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Student Leader Demands On-Campus Polling Place

Priscilla Barbour, the president of Prairie View A&M University's student government association, is seeking something her predecessors were unable to get: a polling place on the historically black university's campus.

BY REEVE HAMILTON JULY 31, 2013 6 AM



Cory Dixon / Prairie View A&M

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On Friday, Barbour, a senior studying political science, sent a letter to Texas Secretary of State John Steen arguing that Waller County's failure to put a voting location on the campus violates the federal Voting Rights Act, which prohibits voting practices that discriminate against people on the basis of race.

"I wanted him to understand the importance of this," she said of Steen, with whom she has requested a meeting. "I wanted him to understand, directly from me to him, what is going on."

Her complaint hinges on the fact that the nearest polling place for the county is more than a mile from campus housing. She has requested one at the Memorial Student Center, the hub of student life on campus.

Of the roughly 8,400 students enrolled at the university, she said, about 5,000 live on campus, and about half of those students are registered to vote in the county. But many do not have access to transportation, she said, meaning they have to walk to the polling location.

She added that the current polling location students use cannot accommodate the university's population, leading to long waits in addition to a long walk. In 2012, she said, "the wait for some students was over an hour and thirty minutes. Students have had to put off voting so they don't miss class."

Students don't have the same problem with municipal elections. The city of Prairie View provides an on-campus polling location for local elections. "If the city can accommodate us, why can't the county?" Barbour asked.

"It leaves the voter confused," she said of the various locations for city and county elections. "I don't think voting is something that should be confusing. I don't think it's something that should be inconvenient or something that should be a hassle. It's your right as an American citizen, and it should be the county's responsibility to make sure that it is easily accessible to all people."

Gary Bledsoe, a civil rights lawyer and longtime president of the Texas NAACP, said this is not a new fight. "Waller County is one of the worst offenders in Texas," he said, noting that voting procedures in the area have been the subject of multiple lawsuits in the last decade.

Barbour noted that previous student leaders have tried to secure a more convenient polling location, and that some students have held demonstrations in protest of the current situation.

A call to the Waller County Elections Office was not returned.

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Robyn German is set to take over as that county's elections administrator next month. Steen's spokeswoman, Alicia Pierce, said German is the person Prairie View A&M students need to contact, because the polling locations are determined by the county. She indicated that the Secretary of State's Office, upon receiving Barbour's letter, encouraged German to reach out to the students.

"The secretary of state is always happy to meet with civically-minded students," Pierce said. "We'd be happy to set up a meeting later, but as far as addressing their specific concerns, [German] is who they need to talk to."

In her letter, Barbour requested that the Memorial Student Center be designated a polling location by October, allowing time to get the word out to students in advance of the November elections. "Ideally, it would then be a continuous thing so that we don't have to go to such great lengths in the future," she said.

She said she has not received a response to her letter yet but is hopeful that a solution can be reached.

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